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# Nicoll, Don oral history interview

Andrea L'Hommedieu

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## **Interview with Don Nicoll by Andrea L'Hommedieu**

### *Summary Sheet and Transcript*

#### **Interviewee**

Nicoll, Don

#### **Interviewer**

L'Hommedieu, Andrea

#### **Date**

November 14, 2002

#### **Place**

Lewiston, Maine

#### **ID Number**

MOH 376

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#### **Biographical Note**

Donald Eugene "Don" Nicoll was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on August 4, 1927, and grew up in the West Roxbury section of the city. He is the son of George and Mary Nicoll. He attended Robert Gould Shaw Junior High School and Boston English High School and graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine in 1949, majoring in History with a minor in Government. Don met his future wife, Hilda Farnum, also a Colby student, when they worked in the resort town of Ocean Park, Maine, in the summer of 1944. Nicoll began his graduate work at Pennsylvania State College in 1949, where he received a teaching fellowship in the Department of History. His graduate studies concentrated on American history, specifically the period from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War .. His M.A. (1952) thesis was on the Alien and Sedition Acts.

Starting in 1951, Nicoll and his family settled in Buckfield, Maine where he picked apples and taught part time at Stephen's High School, located in Rumford. Nicoll began working as an announcer for WLAM radio in Lewiston, Maine. He became a reporter and then news editor for WLAM and WLAM-TV. In June 1954, Nicoll left WLAM to become Executive Secretary of the Democratic State Committee at the request of Frank M. Coffin, who has just become chairman. Mr. Coffin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Maine's Second Congressional

District in 1956 and Nicoll went to Washington, DC, as his administrative assistant, continuing in that post until December 1960, the end of Congressman Coffin's second term. Mr. Coffin ran for governor in 1960 and was defeated. After the election Senator Edmund S. Muskie asked Nicoll to join his staff as legislative assistant and news secretary. Nicoll served in that position until 1962, when he became administrative assistant. He continued in that post until 1971, when he became personal advisor to Senator Muskie. He left the senate office in mid-1972.

From 1972 until his retirement in 2005 Nicoll worked as a program and policy planner, first as a consultant (1972-73), then as chairman and chief executive officer of the New England Land Grant Universities Joint Operations Committee (1973-1975), then as coordinator of planning and vice president for planning and public affairs for the Maine Medical Center (1975-1986), then as a consultant (1986-2005). His clients were primarily in the non-profit sector and included, universities, libraries, education associations, health care organizations and social service agencies. He also worked as a volunteer, heading a variety of public policy projects, including the Maine Task Force on Government Reorganization, the Maine State Compensation Commission, the Maine (Mental Health) Systems Assessment Commission, the Maine Consortium for Health Professions Education, the Southern Maine Community Television Consortium, the Maine Special Commission on Government Reorganization (co-chair), the Board of Visitors of the University of Southern Maine's Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, the Maine-Aomori Sister-State Advisory Council and the Governor's Allagash Wilderness Waterway Working Group.

From 1998-2005, Don Nicoll was the Director of the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project at Bates College.

### **Scope and Content Note**

Interview includes discussions of: responsibilities as secretary for Frank Coffin; the new Democratic State Committee office; importance of state committees; first impressions of Frank Coffin; reverse press conference; first encounter with Edmund Muskie; relationship between Frank Coffin and Ed Muskie; members of the State Committee; working with Frank Coffin on the state committee; and candidates in the 1954 campaigns.

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## **Transcript**

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview with Donald E. Nicoll on November the 14th, the year 2002, in Lewiston, Maine at Bates College. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Don, the last interview with Jeremy Robitaille ended with your acceptance of the secretary position on the State Committee with Frank Coffin as chair. I'd like to start there by asking what responsibilities you took on in the role of secretary, both in terms of the State Committee specifically, and in general the '54 election statewide?

**Don Nicoll:** Okay, the State Committee up until 1954 had not had a full time staff person. They had hired people from time to time in campaigns, I believe, but there was no great record of that. And what Frank Coffin as state chairman wanted to do was to create a permanent office with support for the State Committee, and support for candidates and for the County committees and the Town and City Committees. And so he went to the State Committee, as I think I told Jeremy, and asked them if they would approve hiring somebody for that position. They said,

fine, go ahead and do it if you can raise the money. And he got a pledge of a thousand dollars, or one single payment of a thousand, from a businessman in the Lewiston area who was supportive. And based on that came to me and asked me, in effect what he said to me was, you've been on my back for months now to get active. Now I have, now you have to come and go to work for me. And at that point I went home and I told Hilda what I had decided to do. So left the radio station, where by the way I was earning seventy five dollars a week for a full time job as editor of radio and television news, and went to work for the State Committee at the munificent salary of a hundred dollars a week, or five thousand two hundred dollars a year.

And we had initially no other staff, and our office was down on Lisbon Street in a second floor room. It was a single room about three times the size of the room in which you are interviewing me, on the second floor of a building owned by Benoit's, a then clothing store based in Portland and with a branch in Lewiston, at the corner, that store was at the corner of Lisbon Street and Ash, I believe it's Ash, the street closer to Main Street than the City Hall. And we had in that room, which was about, oh, five feet wide by ten feet long at the most, and in that room which had a window, had a window looking out on Lisbon Street, and it had a frosted glass window in the door into the office, and that was it. And a member of the local painters union painted the sign on the door that said Maine Democratic Party. And in the office we had a desk that served as a desk/table, and a chair, and we did get a telephone, and that was it. That was the extent of our furniture. And we had a portable manual typewriter, my typewriter that came in and served as the typewriter.

And I can remember when Ed Muskie and Dick McMahon came into the office during the campaign for some campaign planning work. Dick and I sat on newspapers piled up on the floor, and we gave the candidate the chair to sit in. And the desk was a, the desk and the chair both were donated pieces of furniture from Benoit's. The desk was about, oh, two and a half feet wide by about, oh, three to four feet long, and had drawers on either side of the knee hole and a little drawer in the center. The top was wooden, it had no legs to speak of, it just sort of sat on the floor, and the top had a space where at one time there was a, probably a leather inset over the main part of the writing area, and that had long since deteriorated and it had a piece of blotting paper, a blotter in the middle there when we had it. And it stayed around, we used it for several years; ultimately it was the support for our mimeograph machine. But that first campaign time, that was our campaign desk.

My job essentially was to provide support for the secretary of the State Committee who was an elected officer, keeping minutes, etcetera, to keep the books, the operating books for incoming expenditures - our treasurer, Louis Labbe, was the one responsible for the finances and the records - and generally to provide support for the State Committee on publicity, on campaign planning, on campaign coordination, to work in advance of the primaries in lining up candidates for a write-in at that point, because all of the nominations had been completed but there were a number of open seats for the legislature and we encouraged people to run as write-in candidates. And as we got into the campaign, helping the candidates for Congress, U.S. Senate and the gubernatorial race in news releases, arrangements for radio and television time, etcetera. And since I had had experience as a radio and television news editor, and work writing commercials

for radio and television, and knew the business, I was generally responsible for organizing and setting up the campaign media work and work on advertising. It was sort of a jack-of-all-trades occupation.

**AL:** You mentioned that someone donated the thousand dollars to get the State Committee office started. Was that an anonymous donation, or do you recall the name of the business man?

**DN:** I would have to check back to be sure of that. I think it was George Lane who was a business man and banker in Lewiston, but I'd have to double check with Frank Coffin. It was not an anonymous donation. We didn't publicize it at the time, but it would have been reported in the state reporting requirements if at that time the State Committee was required to file reports on its income and expenditures, outside of incoming expenditures for candidates. But I'm pretty sure we did have to report our general income and expenditures, so that would have been reported.

**AL:** Now you said this was the first time that the Democrats really formed a State Committee office in Maine?

**DN:** In an office, yeah.

**AL:** An office itself. Had the Republicans already had that structure established?

**DN:** I don't think, they did not have, they did not have a permanent office staff at the time. That's my recollection, that they did not. In fact they set up a more permanent office after we did.

**AL:** That's surprising. I thought for sure, because they had such a stronghold at that time that they were very well organized.

**DN:** Up until that point, more so in the Republican Party than in the Democratic Party in some respects, candidates were the important ones. Particularly candidates for governor, and they tended to dominate the party. So the party organization really was a tool of the candidates, and then office holders, and the party as such, as an organization, was far less important. They came together for the convention every two years. Republicans generally didn't have to do a lot of work to recruit candidates. And one of the problems that the Republican Party had during that period was the consequence of their very bitter primary campaigns when people sought the nomination for governor or for Congress or for the Senate.

**AL:** So did you then, when these state committees were established, that it became more central to the parties and the people running depended a little bit more on coordination through the state party?

**DN:** Yeah, this was true certainly for the Democratic Party from 1954, I would say, until 1958 when it started to break down a bit. Because from '54 to '58, and that's a fairly short period, the Democratic Party was very weak in terms of numbers of office holders. And members of the

party and candidates were very dependant on the State Committee to take the lead on organizing campaigns, coordinating them, etcetera. And the candidates for governor, U.S. Senator, Congress, literally had to be recruited.

It wasn't a case of the candidates being eager to run and then contesting and sort of pulling the party along behind them. It was the party taking the lead and actually doing the recruiting. Now that's not to say that subsequently there weren't campaigns where the State Committee played an active role in coordinating the general election campaign. That did happen, but there was much more strife in the party around the question of who was going to be the nominee for governor, for example. And we had the luxury in those first years of having a unified party driving the agenda and selection of candidates.

**AL:** You talked about first meeting Frank Coffin, or observing him at the Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, and then being persistent in your thought that he should get involved in Maine politics. What impressed you about Frank Coffin in those early years?

**DN:** Well, he was an extraordin---, was and is an extraordinarily intelligent person with a very creative mind, very extraordinary imagination, and very eloquent and a superb writer. And he was also a highly disciplined and productive individual, could do a number of things very, very well, and focused and did his work. And he had a very strong reputation even then as a relatively young man and early practitioner of the law; he had an extraordinary reputation as a brilliant lawyer, and thus was sort of involved in the community. And on top of all of that, he was a very warm and splendid person, thoroughly honest, thoroughly decent, very much concerned about people and about the party as a vehicle for service and servant of the people, not as a tool for power. And he was fun. He was witty and good humored, and had high expectations for himself and for others. I thought he was somebody who could do great things for the party, and somebody the state ought to get to know better.

**AL:** You mentioned he had a great imagination. Can you recollect or illustrate for me how you came to observe that? I'm just trying to think of, you would have seen him produce something or talk about something?

**DN:** He would, for example, this is not, let me back up. There are a couple of ways one can think about Frank Coffin's imagination. One of them is as an artist, and he in those days was painting and drawing, and later took up sculpture, wood and stone sculpture, and his work was not conventional paint-by-the-numbers stuff. It was very imaginative, different perspectives, well executed, superb sense of form came out particularly in his sculpture; but that one part of him, just a very imaginative and talented artist.

The other imagination played out in the way he handled his law work, and in his approach to planning different ways for the party to function. Just two illustrations: there was in 1952 or '3, it would have been 195-, yes, it started in '52, continued into '53, a great controversy in Maine about the liquor scandal, the Liquor Commission scandal. And people were attacking then Senator Fred Payne [*sic* Fred Payne was still governor and a candidate for senator when the "liquor scandal" investigation began. See the next paragraph] for, as governor, having engaged

in shady deals on liquor sold in the state liquor store, particularly wine. And so Frank was retained by Fred Payne to represent him in connection with hearings that the state legislature was holding.

And I remember vividly covering the opening day of the hearing when Frank came as attorney for former Gov. Payne. And this, matter of fact, this may have been '52 and he was still governor. It was before Burt Cross was elected. But the hearing was in the house chamber, and I think the committee chair was Senator Reid, R-E-I-D, of the Augusta area, James Reid. And I didn't know Frank Coffin at the time, but I went as a reporter and I remember him getting up and saying to the chairman, "Mr. Chairman, this is a case of very sour grapes." Which illustrated both his penchant for punning, awful puns, the worse the better, and an imaginative turn in looking at a legal and public relations problem for the governor, and twisting it to give it a little humorous touch and to put the accusers on the defensive. The accuser in that case being Herman Sahagian, who was the owner of Fairview Wine, and not an entirely savory character himself. So it was that kind of imagination as well.

And when, during the pre-1954 period, Frank was the chair of the pre-convention platform committee, he was the one who came up with the idea for holding public hearings and sending out an extensive survey to a lot of community leaders and to the heads of departments in state government asking their opinion on issues, and going for public sessions on constructing a party platform. And this is another kind of imagination, thinking of better ways to engage the public and to focus attention on public policy issues.

**AL:** Now, did that platform committee and the survey, did that come out right after the reverse press conference? Did the press conference happen first, and that gave them some ideas to put as issues in the survey? Or, I'm trying to get a sense of the timing.

**DN:** The reverse press conference was in the spring of '52.

**AL:** Fifty-three.

**DN:** Fifty-three. The pre-convention platform committee didn't get underway until late '53, and that was, but there were ideas bubbling as a res-, around the reverse press conference, and then Frank was engaged in conversations with a lot of people, including the League of Women Voters leadership and others. And I think the topics placed in the survey for the pre-convention platform committee, and a lot of the search for witnesses at public meetings, was driven in part by the results of that reverse press conference, and also reactions to the pre-convention platform committee work.

**AL:** And these town, or public meetings, those were new to people.

**DN:** Yes.

**AL:** Were those what we would assimilate with town meetings of today sort of thing?



**DN:** Similar, similar. It was an attempt to give people from different groups and individuals a chance to get involved and to have an impact.

**AL:** Now, I don't know if it's fair to ask you this question, but you know of course Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin both attended Bates College. And although weren't here at the same time, must have been aware of each other. Do you know when they first met?

**DN:** I'm not sure of when they first met. And I think Frank is addressing that in his memoirs. And my recollection from reading a draft of those memoirs is that they met sometime in the late forties probably. It's also possible that they met in connection with a Bates function. But I don't think Ed knew anything about Frank since he graduated, he graduated, I believe, from Bates the year Frank came in as a, matriculated as a student.

**AL:** Right.

**DN:** As Ed graduated in '36, and in the fall of '36 Frank entered Bates. So Frank was aware of Ed because he lived here in Lewiston and there were family connections with Bates. And he paid attention to what was going on on the campus, and was aware of Ed. I think they didn't meet until after the war sometime, and had limited contacts until after both the reverse press conference and Frank's Jefferson-Jackson speech in Westbrook.

**AL:** Do you remember your first encounter with Ed Muskie?

**DN:** I think it was at that reverse press conference.

**AL:** That was the first time.

**DN:** Yeah.

**AL:** And so soon after Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin were interacting more regularly.

**DN:** Yeah.

**AL:** And you were talking about puns, and from other interviews I know that Ed Muskie was given to puns as well. Did you ever observe the two of them enjoying some puns?

**DN:** Well, yes, frequently when we were meeting either in the campaign or around the governor's office business, or just social occasions, they would challenge each other. And the most vivid and in many respects the funniest memory of that came in July of 1955, when Governor Muskie, his administrative assistant Maury Williams, Frank Coffin and Floyd Nute, who was the governor's press secretary, and I had a three or four day trip on the Sea and Shore Fisheries research boat, which was really a time for us to talk strategy around the governor's programs.

The first session of the legislature was over, and there was a hiatus in the summer. And the question was what do we do next, where do we go from here? And it was essentially an apolitical meeting in a sense, because obviously he had his two staff people from his office, and Frank and I were there primarily because of the work we did with the governor's office on program, not because of campaign work. And politics came into it obviously, but it was not a partisan political gathering.

And we were on the boat, sailing around Penobscot Bay and talking. It was a mix of relaxed talk and was sort of a working holiday for several days. And in that setting, Ed and Frank were just trying to out pun each other, and doing it over and over again. Floyd Nute was a very bright guy, a very skilled reporter and writer, hated punning, just detested it. And the more this went on, the more unhappy he became because he was sort of a captive audience along with Maury and me. And Floyd also had a bit of a drinking problem, and so he turned to the bottle and spent a good bit of time sitting there drinking and trying to stay out of the line of fire of the puns. And pretty soon he was not feeling much pain and he was a little bit surly. It was in the evening, as I recall it was in the evening, and Floyd had really had it as far as the punning was concerned, and Ed or Frank laid out one pun too many for Floyd and he leaned forward at the table and said, "I'll bet you guys can't tell limericks."

And that was all they needed, the rest of the voyage was inundated with limericks as they out limericked each other. And part of the punning had to do with sort of puzzles for people, riddles, and I remember, this was the same trip; we were going through Eggemoggin Reach, which is the passage between Brooksville and Deer Isle, under the Deer Isle bridge. And Frank came up with an elaborate riddle, the basic part of which was, "What did the lobsterman say when he swallowed a bit of lobster shell and had to reach way down to get it out of his throat?" Nobody had the answer, and Frank proudly said, "Epiglottis reach." But that was the sort of thing that went, the sort of silliness that went on and was a great tension breaker, except for Floyd.

**AL:** Did you, so how did, what was your impressions or observations of Ed Muskie and Frank Coffin when they worked together during those years in the fifties?

**DN:** Well, they were obviously very fond of each other and they had great respect for each other. And their minds were, they were equally brilliant, and very different in the nature of their brilliance. And their rhetorical style was very different. Frank has been referred to as having a very subtle mind, and if you read his opinions as an appeals judge, and you read some of his political writings from that period and subsequent writings about the law, his arguments tend to be fairly intricate and sometimes playful, and the language is fairly intricate. And his vocabulary tends to be unusual in a sense, not ordinary daily speech.

Ed Muskie, who had a very incisive and insightful mind and was one of the most intellectually disciplined people I've ever known, and analytical, tended to use far broader terms and far simpler language in the end than Frank, largely because his focus was on persuading voters or others who didn't use very complicated language. Now, Frank's was the language of a learned judge and lawyer. Ed's was the language of the orator and the communicator with people.

Neither one of them talked down to people, whatever their audience, and neither one was really dumbing down the language at any point. But Ed's was, and Ed's language sometimes was fairly flat in the sense that it was not designed to stir up the emotions, but it was eloquent and persuasive, but geared to the language that people tend to use.

And when it came to work on specific issues, Ed would tend to tackle things in a very logical fashion and strip it to its essentials as he went through the arguments. The essentials might be large in number, but they were straightforward and they had logical connections. Frank would play around with ideas, looking at different facets of a problem and ideas and just sort of tossing it around, thinking it through and then coming up with an insightful answer. Whereas Ed had sort of stripped away all the illogical suggestions and tested every single option in the list with great care, ruthlessly, whether somebody else or he put forward the idea it was treated with the same ruthlessness to get to the heart of the matter and be as sure as you could that you either had the right answer, or if there was no right answer you knew what the most defensible answers were. And they respected each other, and respected, admired the different approaches, and so they worked very well together. And then of course they had some similar likes in terms of humor that lightened the conversation. And they had a passionate commitment to doing what was right.

**AL:** Did they find they were very similar in their political philosophies?

**DN:** Essentially, yes, yeah. And neither Frank Coffin nor Ed Muskie was or is an ideologue. And it's not really possible in my opinion to classify either one of them as a liberal or a conservative, except if one is talking about their basic commitments. Their basic commitments were to making sure that everybody had an equal opportunity, that people at the lower end of the economic or social scale weren't brushed off or ignored or made to pay the prices of society, and that it made sense to improve the economy and the economic and social and educational opportunities for everybody, and that Maine deserved a shot at economic growth, etcetera.

So they had those basic philosophical commitments. How that played out in public policy was a pragmatic question for them. There was no ideologically right way to solve the problem, and as a consequence frequently they appeared to be conservatives. You didn't simply spend money for the sake of spending money, but you weren't afraid to spend money if that was what it was going to take to solve a very important problem, and if spending that money could be done prudently. And that I think is what has confounded people trying to understand them over the years. They are not, they are not and were not ideologues when it came to pragmatic resolution of public policy issues, but they were absolutely firm in their commitments to the basic rights and opportunities for people in the society.

And the other thing to be said of both of them is that neither one had a career plan. Neither one had sat down and said, I want to be president some day, or I intend to be president some day, or I intend to get on the Supreme Court some day, and I'm going to plot what I have to do to get to the next step, to get to the next step, to get there. They took opportunities as they came to them, and they applied themselves to the task at hand, whether it was learning their craft or responding

to a public policy issue, and doing it very well.

**AL:** I'm going to stop right there and turn the tape over.

**DN:** Okay.

*End of Side A, Side B*

**AL:** We are now on Side B of the interview with Donald E. Nicoll on November 14th, the year 2002. And you were going to elaborate on the State Committee functions and some of the people who you were involved with on that committee.

**DN:** The important thing to remember about 1954, when one is talking about the campaign, is that, number one, there were a limited number of candidates for the House and the Senate. Not all the vacancies were being contested by the Democrats, including some vacancies in the areas where we had a chance to win. And having candidates in as many races as possible was essential if you were going to attract the candidates for major office, and if you were going to attract party workers. So much of our task in the early days following my coming on board, I actually went to work formally for the State Committee on the 4th of June, and the primary was about three weeks later.

Before I came to work for the party formally, I had been doing some work as a volunteer, and, very quietly because of my role as a reporter, in recruiting candidates, starting with Paul Fullam who had been my advisor at Colby College when I was an undergraduate, and getting him to run for the U.S. Senate. And also applying a little bit of pressure and support for Tom Delahanty running for the congressional second district seat. The only candidate who was ready and willing and already running was Jim Oliver, who was running in the first district, and he was in the race. And we had to recruit Paul Fullam, had to recruit Tom Delahanty, had to recruit Ken Colbath from the third district for that congressional, and then we had to do a lot of recruiting at the county and local level for the legislature.

The major task I had initially was really working on write-in candidates for legislative seats, and we did that over those few weeks. The second thing we were doing was getting ready for the primary and immediate post-primary period, when we wanted to introduce the candidates to the state. This was the first election in Maine where we had television. We had not had television up to that point. And so we wanted to be sure that we got to as many voters as possible with a sense of who these candidates were. And so I spent time in that period leading up to the primary, one, making arrangements for, or one, encouraging the party to agree to this, and the candidates to agree to a program, and second, organizing the program and then making arrangements with the television station.

At that time television was live, period, in the state. It was possible to put on a film, but it had to be a, literally a sixteen millimeter film with the sound recorded on the strip on the side of the film, just as the movies were. That's a fairly long, complicated process and not practical in a campaign, and so we had to make arrangements for the program immediately following, on the

Sunday following the primary we had to make arrangements for the time on a couple of channels, Portland and Bangor, and getting the candidates and their staff ready, and getting agreement on the basic theme, if not the wording that they were going to use in their statements.

And so on the Sunday following the primary we had that initial program with the five top candidates appearing, with Frank Coffin acting as the moderator for the meeting, and each candidate had I think it was three minutes for a presentation, then there was a brief introduction for each one. And then when the program was over we kept the camera on in the studio and the wives who had been sitting to the side watching came out and mingled with the candidates, so the final shot was the candidates and their wives talking together. The program was dull stuff by conventional television production values, but it was very successful in presenting the candidates as believable, intelligent human beings, which is not the way a number of Republicans had looked at Democratic candidates up to that point. But that took a lot of my time in that early part.

And we were also trying to plug holes in the county organizations throughout the state, and that meant a lot of work with the State Committee. And the State Committee members were also involved in recruiting candidates for the legislature. The State Committee, there were sixteen members of the State Committee at that time, one man and one woman from each county, and that was the, excuse me, it was a thirty-two member committee, sixteen men and sixteen women. And the, I can't remember everybody who was on the State Committee at the time at this moment, but the names are listed in papers in the archives, and I'll give you some highlights on some of the folks who were most memorable.

In the first, well starting at the southern end of the state, York County as I recall, Armand Duquette was the State Committeeman and I think the State Committeewoman was a woman from Old Orchard. Armand was a very sage, long time, low key political leader, legislator from Biddeford, was closely allied with the mayor of Biddeford who was an old time, old style city boss, Papa Lausier. Louis I believe was his first name, Louis Lausier, L-A-U-S-I-E-R. And Armand was solid, cooperative, but the party in York County was a bit dicey to deal with because of the different factions, and some of the patterns of behavior and the old style urban politics.

Cumberland County, the State Committeewoman I believe at that time was Jane Callan (*sp?*) Kilroy, who was George Mitchell's aunt. And Jane was noted, she was a very formidable woman, and was noted primarily as the regular singer of the Star Spangled Banner at party meetings. And she was known as a very tough customer, very demanding, very difficult to get along with on many occasions. And Ed Muskie was constantly having troubles with George's Aunt Jane. He used to delight in growling at George about his Aunt Jane.

I can't remember, oh, of course, the State Committeeman from Cumberland County was one Louis Labbe. Louis Labbe was from Brunswick, and Louis was a baker by trade. He was one of those individuals whom I always think of as kind of a nineteenth century middle aged male, a man with a very round head and a round body, compact, not sloppy fat, just simply round. And a

man who had a little moustache and his hair was always plastered down, parted carefully almost in the middle and plastered down. And he never went anywhere in public except in a suit and tie, and it was always an impeccable suit and tie, and he was very carefully groomed at all times.

And Louis was a very particular treasurer, and meticulous in keeping the books. And poor Louis was scared to death that these young men who had come into the party were going to send him and everybody else off to jail, because they were taking money in so fast and spending it even faster. And I can remember him standing before the State Committee, giving his financial reports, and saying, "We have receipts of one hundred dollars and expenditures of one hundred and twenty dollars, by which we have a deficit of twenty dollars." (Those aren't the figures, but that was the line.) And as he said, "Deficit of twenty dollars," he was almost running his finger under his collar, and indicating that he was very dubious about this kind of behavior. Louis was a very good guy, a very nice guy, and loyal, and he somehow survived the financial vagaries of that campaign year.

Moving down the coast, I can't remember all of the people immediately, but it was a collection mostly of people who had been active in the party over the years, with a sprinkling of new people. And they were figures of individual character and personality, and I think for example of Peggy Murray from Hancock County, who was the daughter of a Republican businessman in New Jersey in the county where Jersey City was located, and a staunch opponent of Boss Haig. And her father was a reformer and she had been brought up in a reformist family and became a liberal New Deal Democrat, and she wanted action now and she wanted people mounting the barricades to tear down the old regime. Her counterpart on the committee was Roland Guite, who was from Ellsworth in Hancock County, was a real estate broker and owned a business there, and Roland was a very low key, good salesman but laid back, not terribly assertive in public, and I don't ever recall hearing him espouse a political philosophy in the way Peggy Murray did. But somehow those two very different personalities and perspectives worked together, collaborated on the State Committee.

And I remember someone we've heard about through Eben Elwell and Helen McAleney, Guy Twombly and Phyllis Murphy from Waldo County, who were good, solid, old line Democrats in a heavily Republican area. Phyllis smoother than Guy, Guy sort of an old curmudgeon, and very hard headed about the practicalities of campaigning, and very loyal. And the genius of, one of the evidences of genius on the part of Frank Coffin and Ed Muskie was that they kept that group of some new, a lot old, members of the party engaged and working together and seeing that the party represented them and a lot of others, and they did not come in and say, we need to clean house, we're going to reform the Democratic Party by getting rid of all those dead wood people from the past. They respected people who had been around laboring in the vineyards when there wasn't much return, and they respected the young people who came in with new energy.

And the committee met Sundays, and generally it was about once a month through the summer and fall. And our fall focus was on the September election initially, and doing as well as we could there. I ought to emphasize that the expectation for 1954 was not that we would win a victory, but that we would be building the party for the future. And it was only mid-August

when we began to have a sense that we might win the governorship and possibly even another seat or two.

**AL:** That was one of my specific questions that I wanted to ask you. How did you sense it? I mean, we don't have all, you didn't have then all the sophisticated things that we can do with polling and such. Now, how did you get that sense of the pulse of the voters at that time? What was it that signaled you something's really happening here?

**DN:** You got it in the responses of people at rallies. And one needs to recall that rallies were much more important then because they were where people could gather. There was very limited exposure on television, and so people weren't sitting home watching the candidates and watching the campaign ads and getting their information through those vehicles primarily, they'd go to the rallies. And so the enthusiasm, the fact that there were Republicans for Muskie organizations springing up was a signal, and the reports from our party workers on the responses they were getting and the interest they were getting. And even the reporting in the political columns from newspapers that were nominally Republican, and from reporters and columnists who might be critical of the Democrats but were respectful, which was something new. And then I guess the final piece of it, and it's all a kind of mosaic that you feel. The final piece was that the Republicans seemed more and more antsy and uneasy and having trouble as the campaign progressed. And there were clashes over debates; they were feeling that they were not quite in control.

But we still thought, well, we're going to be close but not going to win, until election night. And I remember hearing the radio reports, and Frank and I saying finally, "We've got to go up to Waterville." Well, no, we planned to go to Waterville anyway to be with Ed on election night, and started out listening to the radio, and as we drove toward Waterville heard the reports indicating that the race was going to be very close, and indeed Ed Muskie was ahead, etcetera, and getting more and more excited as we drove closer and closer to Waterville and the hotel.

We also need to remember the way Burt Cross booted it in connection with Hurricane Carol, and announced the day after Carol, "Well it wasn't as bad as we expected." Which may have been a true statement but didn't show much empathy for the people who had been hurt, naturally or otherwise.

**AL:** When you and Frank Coffin worked on the State Committee, how did you work in terms of each other's strengths and weakness? Is that a fair question? I mean, you must have each had your areas that you really excelled in.

**DN:** Well, Frank was the chairman, and he made the ultimate decisions on major strategies and tactics. And I was responsible for operational matters. And we didn't have any lengthy discussions about roles and responsibilities, we just did it. And he was obviously the front man; I said very little for publication. I doubt that you, in going back over the newspaper reports, would see me quoted more than three or four times in the whole campaign. And my role was to do the work, get as little attention as possible, and get maximum benefits for the members of the

State Committee, the County Committee, etcetera, and for the candidates. And a lot of my work was concentrated on just sheer production of, and developing the strategy for the use of the media. I think that the media decisions were, in retrospect, the right ones, and they involved heavy use of radio.

We scheduled, in the last three weeks before the election fifteen five-minute programs, five each week, Monday through Friday, on every radio station in the state [*sic* for each of the top five candidates: governor, senator, and 3 representatives]. It was cheap enough to do this. We had the candidates record, each one, record fifteen programs: five aimed at a morning audience, five aimed at a midday audience, five aimed at an evening audience. And then we purchased the time, we literally purchased forty-five, yeah, forty-five slots on each station, five in the morning, five midday, five in the evening for three weeks, fifteen days.

And we alternated the candidates so that in a market, let's say the first week you would have the congressional candidate's programs in the morning, the gubernatorial candidate's programs in the afternoon, and the senate candidates' programs in the evening. The next week, you would have the congressional candidate in the evening, the gubernatorial candidate in the morning, and the senatorial candidate midday. Then the third week you had the gubernatorial candidate in the evening, the congressional candidate in the midday, and the senate candidate in the morning.

So they each got a whack at a different market and you had continuity over three weeks. I think that, and by having a five minute program that was four and a half minutes, with about four minutes of that time devoted to the candidate's talk, you had time to develop and issue, a theme, and present it in a persuasive fashion. And people had a chance to absorb what they had to say and get a sense of continuity. I think that, in many ways I think that program, although it did not get the attention a television spot would, was probably one of the more persuasive things we did.

**AL:** How did you come up with that? I mean, what made you decide to do it that way? Were there factors that you recall?

**DN:** Yeah, basically I felt, one, based on the response to the platform that Frank had done, people were hungry to hear about the issues. Number two, Democrats generally had been looked down on as candidates, disregarded; they were sort of beyond the pale, so it was important for people to get a sense of who they were. And the campaign should be a positive one in terms of building interest in them and support them, and interest and support for Democrats. And finally, I knew from my radio experience that you had different audiences at the morning period around the news program in the morning. Noon time, same thing, it was a different audience, and the evening was very different.

So you wanted to reach those different audiences, therefore you had to slot your material for those times. And by using three groups of candidates and rotating them, we could hit each one of the audiences with an appropriate message. You didn't talk about food issues midday, that was not when people interested in food were, primarily were likely to be listening and you would get a different audience at a different time of the day, and we knew that. And it was cheap. You



could buy that, five minutes was, or four and a half minutes was not that much more expensive than one minute.

**AL:** So there was a different philosophy. I think today you say, "How much money can I raise so that I can get such and such spot on the air." Whereas it sounds like it was more that you needed somebody who understood the medium and took the steps to do it, and the affordability was already sort of there.

**DN:** Yeah. And television we used primarily to introduce the candidates, and then bring them back toward the end to encourage people to vote.

**AL:** I have a question, and I don't know if I'm in sequence because it's about Ralph Owen Brewster, and I know that he, in 1952, lost the primary, wasn't it?

**DN:** That's right.

**AL:** To be renominated for the, as senator. So I don't know how much cont-, or when did you have contact with him? Did he go on to have some other public service history after '52, or how did you connect?

**DN:** He wasn't, so far as I recall, involved in the '54 campaign. He was involved in '56 when he attacked Frank Coffin and implied that Frank was soft on Communism, etcetera. And so long distant, Ed Muskie's response on that advertising was in part an attack on Brewster. But as I recall, that was about the only time that we were directly confronting Brewster. And the only time I ever met the man was in 19-, gosh, it would have been in the sixties.

**AL:** Had to have been around 1960.

**DN:** Well I was in, it was in Washington, and somehow Mert Henry was with him, escorting him for some occasion in the Capitol, and I was headed from the Capitol to the Senate office building, they were headed to the Capitol, and we happened to meet. And Mert greeted me and then turned to Senator Brewster, and asked him if he knew me, if we had met. And as I recall Brewster's response, it was, "No, we haven't met. But I know who Mr. Nicoll is, and some day I'm going to kill him."

**AL:** It wasn't a friendly response.

**DN:** And I'm sure what he was recalling, at the time, was the attacks we made on him in the wake of his attack on Frank. It was the old McCarthyite tactic of suggesting that Frank was soft on Communism; this was 1960, not '56 but 1960, and Brewster had obviously been brought in to do a hatchet job by some of the Republicans and he did what he was asked to do. Unfortunately for him, it happened that he attacked Frank on the day Frank's father died, and so it left a sour taste in people's mouths, number one, and Ed Muskie exploited that to the hilt.

**AL:** Now what did Ed Muskie do?

**DN:** Well, he, this all came up at a breakfast meeting in Waterville the next morning. Frank's father died the morning of the first day. Brewster came to Maine and got off the plane and made this attack on Frank in the afternoon I think it was. Frank in the meantime, had withdrawn from campaigning, was with his father's family in Auburn. And the next morning we had the gathering in Waterville, and I can remember going to that. Ed, who was not on the ticket, was campaigning for Frank, became the principal speaker at this breakfast session.

I was there, seated at the table with a reporter for the *Waterville Morning Sentinel*. And Ed first went after Brewster for making such an assault on Frank on the day his father died. Then said, in political campaigns, when they become extremely close and the stakes are high, it's not surprising when particularly a young candidate goes beyond what's proper and indulges in, he didn't use this term, but what he meant essentially was gutter politics. But it's distressing when someone with long experience, and who has been honored by his fellow citizens indulges in these kinds of sleazy campaign tactics. And he referred to Brewster as having been honored by being elected governor, senator, and then to cheapen politics by this kind of behavior was terrible. It was a brilliant political response, and Brewster deserved it. And I remember the reporter sitting there saying, "Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn," and his pencil stood in his hand. He was so overwhelmed by the brilliance of the Muskie, and ferocity of the Muskie attack he couldn't write. How much time do we have left?

**AL:** We have a lit-, ten minutes.

**DN:** Well let me talk a little bit about the candidates in that race, in the '54 campaign. In the first district, I've mentioned before that Jim Oliver was the candidate. Jim had been a Republican member of Congress in the 1930s, had been defeated by Robert Hale who was the incumbent congressman in '54, and had always been a populist. And it's hard for people sometimes to realize that there were and are Republican populists in Maine who have held office, and Jim was one of those. And he had become a Townsendite supporting Doctor Townsend's social security ideas, and was in an area where the Republican party was pretty much dominated by Republican lawyers, establishment lawyers, and business leaders in the commercial heart of the state, was always going after them. And he was a character and operator, he made most of his money in real estate sales, and Jim enjoyed being the gadfly, and assaulting his Republican opponents. And he didn't, he frequently didn't much care what he said as long as it got attention and supported his position. And he was very demanding, wanted more attention because he thought he had a better chance of winning than anybody else and he had been willing to get in the campaign, didn't need to be wooed to become a candidate. It was not in '54, it was in '56, that Ken Curtis went to work for him, and that's another story.

The second district, Tom Delahanty, who had married Judge Clifford's daughter, a former worker in the textile mill, in the Pepperill Mill, and who had worked his way through law school. He was, he had reluctantly, he'd been an FBI agent, came back, went into law practice in Portland [*sic* Lewiston] in the firm that included Irving Isaacson and Alton Lessard, it was the

old Brann, Isaacson firm. And Alton was a good friend of Tom's, and they were in Lewiston, part of what Ernest Malenfant referred to as the "Clifford clique." And Tom was a wonderfully devoted, thoroughly decent human being, a Democrat, a good lawyer, a good solid lawyer, and he agreed to run very reluctantly. His wife did not want him to run, did not want him to win if he ran, and our biggest problem with Tom in the campaign essentially was getting him to campaign, because he was afraid that he might, he'd campaign too hard and might win. And he was afraid of what that might do to his family.

The third congressional candidate was Ken Colbath from Presque Isle. Ken was the owner of a music store in Presque Isle, a good solid Democrat, who was loyal to the party and worked for the party, had no personal ambition in politics, and was willing to work to the degree he had to to be a good campaigner and did so. Not a brilliant speaker, not a brilliant campaigner, but good, solid, loyal Democrat.

And the senatorial candidate was Paul Fullam, who as- I mention had been my advisor at Colby, was still a professor of history at Colby; very well trained historian, and a very effective teacher, who, I used to say that he, Paul didn't have students, he had disciples, inspired his students. And several of his former students were volunteers in his campaign that year. Paul was running for the Senate because in part he felt that the Senate seat was the important seat on the ballot, and he was probably a little upset with himself because he'd been an active supporter of Margaret Chase Smith in the primaries before and had enrolled as a Republican so he could participate in the primaries, and felt that the only choice in the old days was right there. Paul also, I suspect in part because of the kind of ego that academe builds up, wanted more attention than he got in the campaign, wanted more attention to his views, and there was sometimes tension over -

**AL:** Between his share, over his share of the spotlight with the other candidates?

**DN:** And particularly Ed Muskie, because most of the attention of the campaign was being focused on Muskie versus Cross, quite naturally, since the governorship is much closer to people than the Senate seat, and because that's where the conflict was really obvious. And Paul was in an awkward position, campaigning against Margaret Chase Smith, who was an icon, and you couldn't really attack her, didn't make sense to attack her, and Paul had to explain why it was he had signed her nomination papers, etcetera, in 195-, no, 1948. And so he was very restive from time to time, and I'm afraid he felt that I was a bit of a traitor because I wasn't supporting him getting more money and more attention in a race where Ed Muskie was bound to get much more attention than Paul.

**AL:** I think I'm going to stop there today because we are almost out of tape, and we'll take it up from there next time. Thank you.

**DN:** Okay.

*End of Interview*